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1963/09/17

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

September 17, 1963

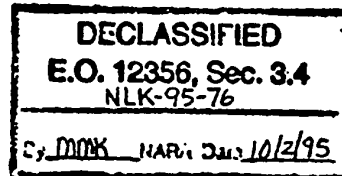
MEMORANDUM TO:

Secretary Rusk
Secretary McNamara
Director McCone
Mr. Harriman
The Attorney General

In the light of further conversation with the President and because Roger Hilsman did not have the advantage of sitting in on the small meeting last night, I have taken the liberty of doing a draft of a possible instruction that would initiate action under what we are now calling Phase I of Track 2 -- namely, a final effort of persuasion and pressure short of a decision to dump the regime no matter what.

h.f. 13
McG. B.

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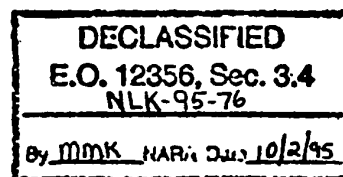
DRAFT TELEGRAM TO SAIGON

Highest level meeting today has approved broad outline of first phase of an action program designed to persuade GVN, if possible, to adopt reforms and make changes in personnel necessary to maintain support of Vietnamese and US opinion in war against Viet Cong. This cable reports this program and our thinking for your comment before a final Presidential decision.

Careful review of all available evidence persuades us that we are not yet in position to make final and complete judgment whether war is lost if present government remains. What is missing is critical evidence whether pressure and persuasion can move Diem regime in direction which will restore good prospect of success. For this reason our judgment is that one further intense effort of the sort should now be made. We believe pressure and persuasion of this sort outlined below may produce important improvements and will, at a minimum, give us a firm basis for more drastic decisions. For these reasons, we do not now wish to decide on more drastic actions which would involve irreversible opposition to regime, although our contingency planning will continue intensively and we plan to establish and sustain close relations with you in this area.

What we have in mind now is an intense effort to persuade Diem by direct negotiation to take such actions as follows:

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1. Elections -- These should be held, should be free, and should be widely observed. Candidates lists should be reopened and members of the opposition should be allowed full and free participation. They should and can be defeated in a free battle.

2. Buddhists and Students -- Let them out and leave them unmolested. This more than anything else would demonstrate the return of a better day and the refocussing on the main job at hand, the war.

3. Party -- Can Lao party should not be covert or semi-covert but a broad association of supporters engaged in a common, winning cause. This could perhaps be best accomplished by disbanding the party and starting afresh.

4. Assembly -- Assembly should be convoked, if necessary in extraordinary session. The Government should submit its policies to it and should receive its confidence. An Assembly resolution would be most useful for external image purposes.

Clear the Air
5. Normalcy -- Diem should get everyone back to work and get them to focus on winning the war. He should be broadminded and compassionate in his attitude toward those who have, for understandable reasons, found it difficult under recent circumstances fully to support him.

A real spirit of reconciliation could work wonders on the people he leads; a punitive, harsh or autocratic attitude could only lead to further resistance.

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6. Press -- The press should be allowed full latitude of expression. Diem will be criticized, but leniency and cooperation with the domestic and foreign press at this time would bring praise for his leadership in due course.

7. Secret and Combat Police -- Keep its role to a minimum and as circumspect as possible, thereby indicating clearly that a period of reconciliation and political stability has returned.

8. Repeal or suitable amendment Decree 10.

9. Rehabilitation by ARVN of pagodas.

10. General Association of Buddhists to publish history of Buddhist agitation, naming those who subverted it into political vehicle to overthrow Diem.

11. Establishment of Ministry of Religious Affairs

12. Liberalization of passport issuances and currency restrictions enabling all to leave who wish to.

13. Cabinet changes to inject new untainted blood, remove targets of popular discontent.

14. Acceptance of Buddhist Inquiry Mission from World Federation to report true facts of situation to world.

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You may wish to add or subtract from the above list, but need to set psychological tone and image is paramount. Diem has taken positive actions in past of greater or less scope than those listed, but they have had little practical political effect since they were carried out in such a way as to make them hollow or, even if real, unbelievable (e.g., martial law already nominally lifted, assembly elections scheduled, and puppet bonzes established).

Specific QTE reforms UNQTE are apt to have little impact without dramatic, symbolic move which convinces Vietnamese that reforms are real. As practical matter we share your view that this can only be achieved by some visible reduction in influence of Nhus, who are -- justifiably or not -- symbol to disaffected of all that they dislike in GVN. This we think requires Nhus departure from Vietnam, at least for extended vacation.

^{no} ~~if~~ We recognize the strong possibility that pressure available to us will not produce this result, but we are convinced that it is necessary to try.

At this end, in this phase, we would plan to maintain a posture of disapproval of recent GVN actions, but we would not expect to make public our specific requests of Diem, ~~but~~ Your comment on public aspects of this whole phase is particularly needed.

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In this phase we will specifically authorize you to apply any controls you think helpful as recommended in your 523. You will be authorized to delay any delivery of supplies or transfer of funds by any agency until you are satisfied that delivery is in U. S. interest, bearing in mind that it is not our current policy to cut off aid. In other words, we share your ^{view} that it will be helpful for GVN to understand that your ^{personal} approval is a necessary part of all U. S. assistance. We think it may be particularly desirable for you to use this authority in limiting or rerouting any and all forms of assistance and support which now go to or through Nhu or individuals like Tung who are associated with him. This authorization will specifically include aid actions currently held in abeyance under DepTel _____ and you will be authorized to set those in train or hold them up further in your discretion. We would leave entirely in your hands decisions on the degree of privacy or publicity you wish to give to this process.

The President is considering a personal letter to Diem as part of this first phase and a first draft is in following telegram for your comment.

Finally, President is considering dispatch at appropriate time of high level group to visit SVN for double purpose of impressing our concern on Diem and reinforcing our public posture ⁱⁿ ~~on the~~ next phases,

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especially with respect to progress of war. President is tentatively thinking of McNamara, Taylor and Alexis Johnson for this mission and would value your comments on this composition since he wants to be sure your position is reinforced and not undermined by any such visible movement of Washington officials.

We repeat that this cable is a report of a plan and not yet an instruction, pending your comment.

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